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ABSTRACT

Purpose

This paper offers a valuable contribution to the literature on marketing and consumption by exploring issues surrounding the enactment of a lesbian, gay or bisexual person's sexual identity and their role as an internal customer of mainstream service organisations.

Methodology/Approach

This article is written from a critical marketing perspective, the prefix 'critical' signifying that the authors adopt what may be considered somewhat radical philosophies and theories, allowing us to question not only generally accepted theories of marketing, but also the assumptions upon which they rest. The 'radical' approaches, i.e. the lenses through which we offer our critique, are postmodernism and queer theory. The theoretical perspectives we critique in this article are internal marketing and emotional labour, and the assumptions we question are those surrounding the importance of the role of the internal customer's identity in consumption of the work role.

Findings

Our findings suggest a link needs to be made between an individual's status as an internal customer (particularly in a front-line service job), their identity (as defined by the individual themselves), and its impact upon their consumption of work (which viewed through a postmodern lens can be seen to help create, maintain and communicate such identity).

Practical implications

For those charged with the management of people in organisations, this paper offers critical insights into the complex practical regulation of organisational diversity in service industries.

Originality/value of paper

Our paper has drawn together various perspectives in the literature that have not previously been linked. If an external customer consumes products and services in order to create or display an identity, and if we accept the argument that employees should be treated as internal customers then the logical conclusion of this perspective is that these internal customers also create their identity through the consumption of work, and not just through their consumption of goods and services. We have considered the complexities of this proposition, using sexual identity management as one example, but the principle could equally apply to other areas of diversity among internal customers within the workplace.

Keywords: 'queer theory'; consumption; internal marketing; sexuality; diversity; performativity

Conceptual paper

Internal marketing and the enactment of sexual identity

INTRODUCTION

Although the extant service marketing literature acknowledges the importance of employees as internal customers of business organisations and their role in delivering satisfaction to external customers there is nothing to be found in this body of literature specifically relating to lesbian, gay and bisexual employees as internal customers. While this is unsurprising given the marketing academy's tendency to shy away from such marginalised topics as sexuality, ethnicity and disability, it is somewhat remarkable given that the academy almost universally acknowledges the importance to consumption of the role played by a person's self-concept and identity.

One aim of critical marketing theorists is to create "a more equitable society and giving voice to those who are marginalised by current marketing discourse" (Catterall *et al.*, 1999:345). This paper therefore adopts a critical marketing approach in order to explore issues surrounding the enactment of a lesbian, gay or bisexual person's sexual identity and their role as an internal customer of mainstream service organisations. The prefix 'critical' signifies our adoption of what may be considered somewhat radical philosophies and theories (Catterall *et al.*, 1999; Saren, 2007), such as postmodernism and queer theory, allowing us to question not only generally accepted theories of marketing, but also the assumptions upon which they rest (Burton, 2001; Catterall *et al.*, 1999; Saren, 2007). The word 'critical' is not intended to signify simply negative criticism as the word is often popularly used (Burton, 2001), rather we agree with authors such as Burton (2001), Catterall *et al.* (1999), and Saren (2007) that critical marketing papers are essential to further our discipline as they tend to challenge accepted wisdom.

While some authors (notably Hetrick and Lozada, 1999) appear to believe that “critical theory is antimarketing theory. Critical theorists promote a pro marketing theory stance, but theory that adequately reflects the social, historical and political context in which marketing discourse and practice occurs” (Burton, 2001:727). Therefore we are offering a critique of marketing, rather than being negatively critical of marketing itself, neither taking an ‘antimarketing’ approach nor taking a “marketing anti-theory” approach which Hetrick and Lozada (1999:162) consider to be the approach taken by postmodernists. We are offering our critique from a postmodern perspective, yet we are being critical of the theoretical underpinnings of marketing practices, and their relevance in light of various theoretical perspectives, rather than the politics of these practices themselves (Burton, 2001).

Hence this article embraces key considerations outlined by other authors (such as Burton, 2001; Catterall *et al.*, 1999; Saren, 2007) when approaching critical marketing: we take an interdisciplinary and pluralistic approach to our meaning of critical marketing; we focus on societal issues and processes; we have addressed the issue of reflexivity in terms of how our work could be used to inform practice, and, finally, we address key aspects of marketing and consumption.

Our approach draws on perspectives offered by queer theory that may help marketers gain a deeper understanding of invisible and marginalised communities based upon sexual identity. ‘Queering’ the gender research agenda better reflects contemporary postmodern society and the

fluidity of identities that are sought and communicated by consumption wider than through consumer goods and services.

This paper argues for a link to be made between an individual's identity (as defined by the individual themselves), their consumption (creating, maintaining and communicating the identity), and their status as internal customers (particularly in front-line service jobs), which in turn feeds into debates on emotional labour and internal marketing.

Consumption and identity

Recent developments in the marketing literature have focused on the manner in which consumers construct identities through the symbolic consumption of goods and services. Rather than a static identity position determined by wider social systems, personal identity in postmodern society is characterised as fluid and pro-actively defined, by the individual, through consumption choices (Giddens, 1993). However, in the main, the literature focuses on consumption by a business organisation's external customers, and, in the main, fails to address any issues of consumption and identity by that organisation's internal customers. Moreover, the marketing literature on identity is dominated by issues surrounding consumption of goods and services, yet, as Wenger (1998, cited in Woodruffe-Burton and Elliott 2002:24) notes, "who we are lies in the way we live from day to day, not just in what we think or say about ourselves", and certainly not just in what goods and services we consume.

Bauman (1998) has argued that there has been a gradual move within society from a work ethic based around notions of moral superiority, to work as a way to accumulate ever increasing

amounts of wealth, shifting human motivations and the drive for freedom into the sphere of consumption. Della Porta and Diani (1999) see this increased focus on consumption as an element in reinforcing identities based on 'lifestyles'. They argue that 'cultural consumption', whether in terms of eating habits or as ways of organising social or emotional life, represent persuasive elements in categorising identities. The danger of such analyses however, is that the importance of work to individuals' lives and identities may be passed over or dismissed. The 'decentring of work' in individuals' lives has been mooted as one key reason for the focus on consumption patterns in recent years, yet recent studies have shown the continued centrality of work in people's lives and, in some cases, that work activities are intruding more into leisure time and home activities (Bradley *et al*, 2000).

Traditional perspectives in marketing are based within the categorisation of individuals into groups along established lines (Burton, 2002). However, in a postmodern society where individual identities may be considered more fluid (Firat and Shultz, 1997) it becomes increasingly important to consider and give voice to those whose identity may not fit into the dominant mainstream. Additionally, a relatively unfruitful search for a body of work that address the worlds' of groups from previously under-represented communities from a marketing perspective highlights that the marketing academy has exhibited a tendency to shy away from research into marginalised communities such as those built around sexual identity, disability and ethnicity, yet almost universally acknowledges the importance to consumption of the role played by a person's self-concept and identity. In this respect, studies from other disciplines may also have something to offer the debate in this area.

Other perspectives on Identity

In the reclamation of the word ‘queer’ from its history as a term of abuse, academics and activists alike have drawn heavily on the work of the French post-structuralist Michel Foucault (1979), arguing for the ‘performance of self’ as the route to freedom for the expression of an individual’s identity (Butler, 1998; Spargo, 1999). Judith Butler (1990) has become a key voice calling for a performance-driven view of identity, arguing that it should, following Rapley *et al* (1998), be dynamic and fluid within each interaction, to meet the exigencies of each unique situation. The question for queer theorists then becomes not *whether* identity should be performed, but what *form* the performance should and does take, at any given time. Jagose (1996) describes the term ‘queer’ as the interconnections between biological sex, gender and sexual desire, whilst resisting the stability and dominance of traditional definitions.

While Schroeder and Borgerson (2004) note that few marketing studies have applied more developed notions of Butler’s philosophical position and Butler herself rarely applied this to marketing, these issues have been taken forward by both Schroeder and Borgerson in various works on marketing communications.

The greatest benefit of queer theory then, for our purposes, is in its universal applicability in challenging hegemonic notions and, in particular, in its applicability to marketing; as Jagose (1996) has argued, queer as a term is unaligned with any particular category so can be applied to any context. This overcomes the problems concerning definitions of terms identified by Caterall *et al* (2002) as well as providing a framework through which to examine fluid and flexible sexual identities in the role of the internal customer.

In their consideration of consumption within subcultures, Goulding *et al* (2004) examined contemporary 'Goth' culture and noted its tolerance of diversity with regard to sexuality. Much has been written in the marketing literature about identity and consumption (Schofield and Schmidt, 2005, for example) and even some concerning marketing to minority groups generally (Macciette and Roy, 1994). Little has been written about sexual minorities in the marketing literature, and that which is evident pertains mostly to the power of the 'pink pound' and lesbian and gay people as consumers (Fugate, 1993; Haslop *et al*, 1998) or the lesbian and gay community as consumers of services (Atton, 1994; Boon and Howard, 2004; Malina and Schmidt, 1997). Warren (1997) argues that research into stigmatised and marginalised groups is crucial to their acceptance by mainstream culture. The more knowledge the public has about these groups, Warren argues, the more comfortable they will become with their inclusion in mainstream life.

Sexual identity and services marketing

The literature on sexual identity and services marketing is similarly limited, and in the main is focused on gendered perceptions of front-line service staff. However, this does reflect the marketing literature's reliance upon researching gendered roles when exploring issues of sexual identity in the workplace. Such 'sex-stereotyping' may be seen as particularly unproductive when attempting to understand a fragmented postmodern society that embraces multiculturalism and pluralism. In a postmodern society, personal identity is often sought and reinforced through consumption, as this paper has already noted, and identity is no longer governed by a hegemonic meta-narrative that polarises identities along gendered lines of 'masculine' or 'feminine'. We

therefore believe that the approach we have taken in this article is strengthened by “queer theory’s challenge to sexual dichotomizing” (Gamson and Moon, 2004:47).

The extant marketing literature does recognise that the appearance of front-line staff has an effect on service customers (Foster, 2002). Moreover, this effect is also recognised in literature from other disciplines. Boris (2006) in her study of women working in post-war aviation notes that “feminine sexuality could be integral to the production of services and thus enhance profit” (Boris, 2006:125). There is also a recognition that the practice of employing ‘aesthetic labour’ is not just prevalent in recruitment to certain service marketing employment, but also is considered to be acceptable to consumers (Dennis and Binns, 2002).

IDENTITY AND THE INTERNAL CUSTOMER

In service organisations designed to meet the needs of marginalised communities, such as those within the hospitality sector in Manchester’s ‘gay village’ for example, entire servicescapes are designed and positioned as ‘gay spaces’, and therefore ‘safe spaces’ where members of this particular subculture may express their collective and individual identities (Haslop *et al*, 1998). Here we can evidence the marginalised customers’ acceptance of a certain ‘aesthetic labour’, with organisational advantage being gained from customers being served by front-line staff who look like themselves (Foster, 2002). The issue of ‘acceptability’ is undoubtedly clouded when considering the employment of front-line staff from marginalised communities in mainstream service organisations. What is considered ‘acceptable’ is then set by the mainstream customer and the mainstream organisation. “Desirable dress on the job ... contains symbolic meaning, but whose sexual subjectivity it expresses is not always clear” (Boris, 2006:123).

Yet problems can arise if the employee wishes to create and communicate a lesbian, gay or bisexual identity through, for example, wearing certain clothing as a ‘marker of gayness’ (Schofield and Schmidt, 2005). “Dress and appearance may provide clues to class, racialized gender, and/or cultural identities” (Boris, 2006:124), yet “even if imposed by employers or curtailed by regulatory rules, dress may generate new notions of self”(Boris, 2006:139).

Although historically perceiving organisational success to rest upon meeting the needs of the external customer there has been a recent paradigm shift that views the importance of employees as internal customers (Mudie, 2003). This involves reconceptualising the organisation as “as a chain of exchanges, activities and actions transacted by internal suppliers and customers” (Enos *et al*, 2002:4). Marketing to internal customers therefore becomes as important as the marketing activities an organisation undertakes externally, recognising that the ability to satisfy internal customers is an integral part of satisfying external customers (Barnes and Morris, 2000). The service marketing literature also recognises that organisations using an internal marketing approach tend to have a higher than usual market orientation, second they tend to adopt a service orientation and third, these organisations often demonstrate a higher than usual empowerment of employees (Enos *et al*, 2002). Although not universally agreeing the benefits to an organisation brought by empowering employees, many authors do agree that empowerment “involves allowing employees to exercise discretion during service encounters” (Sood and Lings, 2004:1-2). However, results of recent empirical research found that if empowering internal customers is not necessary to keep external customers happy, and that staff can not cope with empowerment, then “empowerment can work in an adverse manner and cause an increase in role stress and job dissatisfaction, ultimately resulting in poor service delivery” (Sood and Lings, 2004:8). This, to

some extent, contradicts findings of other previous research. However, the authors also found that “managers need to understand that contact employees also have to be committed to maintaining and improving their service delivery and so need to fulfil their employees demands” (Sood and Lings, 2004:8).

Emotional labour and identity

One of the central tenets of emotional labour research is that certain social, managerial and professional control systems exist which require certain groups of workers to create and maintain ‘acceptable’ public emotional displays for the ends of the organisation. What is deemed ‘acceptable’ in terms of these required emotional displays is circumscribed and dictated by normative hegemonic social, professional, educational and managerial forces. Rousseau’s (1995) work takes a cognitive-perceptual view of this as a ‘psychological contract’ which comprises the “subjective beliefs regarding an exchange agreement between an individual ... the employing firm and its agents”, whereby a major feature of the contract is “the individual belief that an agreement is mutual” with common understanding binding its parties (Rousseau, 2001:512). The psychological contract is based upon both pre-employment knowledge and post-employment socialisation of workers who use information gained from formal sources provided by their employer, and informal sources such as those gathered from co-workers and line managers to “fine-tune their initial understanding of the psychological contract regarding what they can expect in the employment relationship and what they need to provide in exchange” (Rousseau, 2001:519). Morris and Feldman (1996) argue that one of the key aspects to define emotional labour is that it has involved the shift from individuals’ expressing of emotion for their own personal ends to emotion being treated as a ‘marketplace commodity’; that is, an implicit

extension of the ‘psychological contract’ of employment. This market place commodification of emotion relies upon standardised ‘display rules’ (Ekman, 1973, cited in Enos *et al*, 2002:15) i.e. social rules about what is appropriate for certain occupational groups. For example, receptionists and flight attendants are expected to be friendly and cheerful, funeral directors are supposed to appear sombre and reserved (Ashforth and Humphrey, 1993). These display rules are at the base of the assumption that all emotional displays in the workplace that are ‘required’ are in some way exploitative because there is a tendency to assume that all such displays result in *emotional dissonance*. Emotional dissonance is the term used to label the phenomenon in which emotional displays are circumscribed by display rules that run counter to the true emotions felt by a worker (Enos *et al*, 2002).

Often, organisations attempt to build such perceptions by controlling or scripting not only the interaction between employees and customers, but also employees’ dress and appearance (Boris, 2006). Moreover, there is a recognition that these rules may be mediated by state intervention affecting “constraint in dressing, grooming and sexual presence on the job” (Boris, 2006:125). Traditionally such interactions were influenced by the organisation’s approach to the types of employees that are put into the ‘front lines’ and these policies and procedures still have a place in encouraging desirable employee behaviours. However, the effort involved in adopting ‘appropriate’ emotions, in matching display rules or in accepting emotional dissonance takes an effort for employees for which customer satisfaction and organisational efficiency, productivity and profitability are insufficient incentives in and of themselves.

Empowered employees are therefore more likely to invest their ‘whole self’ in their task rather than some managerially circumscribed superficial self due to the revision of their role and increases in the scope and requirement for them to invest an emotional as well as a physical or intellectual component in their labour power.

In addition, the empowerment of the collective group of people called employees is associated with HRM ‘fit’ (Enos *et al*, 2002). The emotional labour content is evident here if organisations endeavour to only recruit and develop those employees who are ‘empowered’ because of their propensity to accept the organisation’s internal marketing approach. In this situation, only those employees open to cooption because they have the ‘right’ disposition and the greatest openness to the organisation’s will prosper or find a place within the organisation. As cooption of this kind is ultimately measured by the degree of identification the employee demonstrates towards, and the general pride and loyalty the employee has in the organisation and its brands, products and services, a core part of any assessment as to the disposition of employees will be the degree of emotional labour they voluntarily render when required.

Internal Marketing and the enactment of sexual identity

It is in the combination of symbolic power, in relation to control of the ‘unacceptability’ of certain emotional behaviours within the workplace context, and sexual power, in terms of the dominance of heterosexuality that, within the wider context of the organisational power relationships Bradley (1999) identifies, can be seen to dominate the regulation of sexual orientation within the working environment. Organisations are socially situated constructions that cannot be divorced from their context of social, economic and cultural relations or

considered as ‘depersonalised systems’. Halford *et al* (1997) argue that organisations have both a formal and informal structure; the informal structure relating to the ways in which the personal, the sexual and the feminine are excluded from any definition of workplace ‘rationality’. In the same way, organisational ‘archives of heterosexuality’ (Hearn *et al*, 1989; Harding, 1992) construct heterosexuality as the dominant frame for sexual orientation (Rich, 1993; Whelehan, 1995). Acker (1990, cited in Ledwith and Colgan, 1996:13) argues that lesbians and gay men within organisations are expected to conform to this hegemonic discourse, requiring them to curtail any expression of their ‘disruptive’ (homo)sexuality within the organisation, a situation she termed ‘organisational celibacy’ (1990, cited in Ledwith and Colgan 1996:13). The ‘invisibility’ of lesbian and gay workers enforced by this organisational ‘silence on sexuality’ requires that individuals calculate the risk of being ‘discredited’ by disclosing their identity, or to attempt to ‘pass for normal’ and try to conceal their ‘discreditable’ identity altogether (Joachim and Acorn, 2000). The stress involved in a strategy of ‘passing’ can be inferred when conversations with those not aware of the individual’s identity are considered. It is in opposition to such pressures to invisibility and ‘celibacy’ that the recently revised notion of ‘queer’ can be located. For Hennessey, promoting ‘queerness’ is a gesture of rebellion against heterosexuality’s pressure to be heterosexual or invisible; that is, either ‘normal’ or to use Hennessey’s words “shamefully, quietly queer” (1994:84).

Research conducted in recent years has confirmed that for lesbians and gay men, the world of employment has the potential to be a most unpleasant and unforgiving experience (Stonewall, 1999; TUC, 2000). Palmer’s study (1993) highlights evidence of discrimination against lesbians and gay men in organisations, with thirty-seven percent of respondents reporting direct

discrimination because of their sexual orientation and an additional eight percent of respondents having been dismissed from their positions for the same reason. In the same survey, forty-eight percent of respondents had experienced some degree of harassment at work, ranging from unwanted jokes, innuendo and loaded comments to more serious reactions in the form of abusive phonecalls, blackmail, violence and even death threats. Such reports draw further attention to the extent of heterosexuality's entrenchment within organisations and the very real 'dangers' for individuals who challenge the hetero-normative hegemony by allowing themselves to become more visible. Yet, this 'symbolism' is embedded not only in workplace interaction, but also in more indirect forms of discrimination, rooted in the organisation's culture. The occurrence of unequal pay - in the form of non-applicable pensions and other partner benefits and with particular reference to dependant's payments for partners and children of lesbian and gay couples - was identified by Palmer's respondents as a considerable cause for concern. Added to 'personal' benefits only available to heterosexual couples, such as health care provision, access to bereavement leave, company car use and access to other corporate services (LAGER, 1993), this 'subconscious' denial of non-heterosexual identities within the workplace further supports Acker's assertion of the dominance of heterosexual 'norms'. In order to protect themselves from direct discrimination and harassment over sixty percent of respondents in both Palmer's study (1993), and a similar study carried out by the Social and Community Planning Research group (Snape *et al*, 1995), admitted that they concealed their sexual orientation from some or all of their work colleagues. Although expressed by some as 'living a lie' (Taylor, 1986), individuals 'in the closet' can be seen to be fulfilling their expected role as 'organisational celibates', by suppressing their sexuality within the workplace. This strategy is only effective because, as Kronenberger (1991) argues, a gay person's minority status is not obvious.

CONCLUSION

The marketing academy does accept the importance of an individual consumer's own pursuit of identity as a key driver of consumption, but there have been very few studies into the effects on consumption of new, fluid, postmodern concepts of identity. Those studies that exist do acknowledge that the creation, maintenance and communication of these identities may need to be hidden to a large extent during a person's daily life, only being freely expressed when that individual is in a 'safe space' with others from a particular subculture or marginalised community (Goulding *et al*, 2004; Haslop *et al*, 1998).

Postmodern researchers recognise that individual identities are often sought through consumption wider than consumer goods and services, and many have indeed paid attention to the decentring of work in individual's lives. The academy has also paid attention to the employee as an internal customer, particularly in the service marketing literature, but again, these concepts have not been addressed by researchers looking at identity more broadly.

This article has argued that a link needs to be made between an individual's identity (as defined by the individual themselves), their consumption (that can create, maintain and communicate this identity), and their status as internal customers (particularly when employed in front-line service jobs).

The service marketing literature does start to examine this by understanding the notion of 'aesthetic labour' (Dennis and Binns, 2002), and the acceptability of the appearance and actions

of service industry employees (Foster, 2002). However, when these employees are from subcultures or marginalised communities, acceptability is more easily aligned to an individual identity when in a 'safe space' that serves customers from the same subculture or marginalised community. It is therefore evident that for certain less visible minorities such as lesbian, gay and bisexual employees (Kronenberger, 1991), the acceptability of their sexual identity does not appear to fit when serving mainstream customers of mainstream organisations.

It is here that the paper argues that perspectives such as queer theory may help marketers. This perspective is gaining acceptance by other disciplines as being able to offer a new approach more in keeping with an understanding of fluid postmodern identities (Jagose, 1996).

Due to its link with HRM research, other new perspectives may also offer a deeper understanding into the internal customer that include the notions of empowerment and emotional labour. Internal marketing is seen as a powerful tool that facilitates the co-option by the organisation of appropriate emotions by the service employees (Enos *et al*, 2002). However, for lesbian, gay and bisexual employees this can also include the regulation of sexual orientation within the working environment (Acker, 1990; Bradley, 1999). Such employees therefore often conceal their sexual identity from colleagues (Snape *et al*, 1995). The potential for stigmatisation and harassment which characterises lesbian and gay existence presents not only complications for those charged with employee welfare - HR professionals - given the effort and control required to express organisationally-desirable emotions during every personal transaction (Morris and Feldman, 1996), but also for marketers. Acting out desired emotions, particularly when the act is only superficial, rather than generated from within the employee, "conflicts with

customer expectations of honest behaviour and may be interpreted by customers as ‘cheating’” (Grandey 2003, cited in Walsh *et al*, 2005: 8).

Postmodern critique notes the reversal of production and consumption and the decentred subject leading to a world where “for consumers to fulfil their desires, marketing organizations will need to empower the consumers to become marketers of (self) images themselves” (Firat and Shultz, 1997:194). We have therefore chosen to additionally draw from perspectives on identity offered by queer theory as we are seeking a fluid and flexible yet critical approach to the way in which individual’s roles as internal customers are consumed within the workplace; the lens through which we examine consumption and internal marketing. This is in keeping with the postmodern critique on consumption, and the issue of viewing (particularly front-line service) employees as *internal* customers. If an external customer consumes products and services in order to create or display an identity, and if we accept the argument that employees should be treated as internal customers then the logical conclusion of this perspective is that these internal customers also create their identity through the consumption of work, and not just through their consumption of goods and services. We have considered the complexities of this proposition, using sexual identity management as one example, but the principle could equally apply to other areas of diversity among internal customers within the workplace.

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